DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 070 798 UD 013 109

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TITLE The Ethnic Student: Academic and Social Problems.
PUB DATE Sep 72
NOTE 14p.; paper presented at the American Psychological Association annual convention, Honolulu, Hawaii, September 1972

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *College Students; Counseling Programs; *Counselor Role; Cultural Differences; Cultural Factors; Culture Conflict; *Ethnic Groups; Intervention; Middle Class Culture; Middle Class Norm; Social Adjustment; *Social Problems; *Student Adjustment; Student Alienation; Student Problems

ABSTRACT

This paper is concerned with conflicts which arise for students in the university setting as a result of having ethnic backgrounds different from the middle-class norm. There are a variety of ways in which an ethnic student can find himself in a classroom situation where behaviors which had evoked positive reinforcement in his subculture are now negatively reinforced. Faced with discrepant reward systems, this student must choose between maintaining his ethnic pattern of response or adopting behaviors which are in conflict with his own personal values and experiences in order to meet the expectations of the mainstream culture. College students are, in general, ideal therapy candidates. The ethnic students who find their way to campus counseling centers and clinics are usually responsive also, but this probably has to do with a process of self-selection--the ethnic students in therapy being for the most part already heavily invested in a middle-class life style. Attempts at "outreach" or "intervention" may be appropriate in a number of settings, including university counseling services. For example, it has been suggested that psychologists become actively involved in designing programs to increase faculty and administration awareness of the problems and needs of ethnic students. (Author/JM)

ED 070798

The Ethnic Student: Academic and Social Problems.

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UD 013109

Abstract

Colleges and universities in this country have traditionally served to prepare individuals for a role in white middle-class American society. This paper is concerned with conflicts which arise for the "ethnic" college student as a result of his having a subcultural value system which differs to some extent from the middle-class norm. Problems relating to academic performance and psychosocial development are discussed. In addition, some issues are raised regarding the role of psychologists who are employed in university settings and deal with ethnic students.

THE ETHNIC STUDENT: ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS[1]

Colleges and universities in this country have traditionally been white middle-class institutions which have served to prepare individuals for a role in middle-class American society. They have operated on middle-class assumptions and have rewarded middle-class behaviors. In recent years, however, there has been an increasing population of non-white, non-middle-class students on our campuses. Students belonging to this population who wish to be assimilated into the middle-class structure must learn the appropriate middle-class behaviors and adopt the appropriate middle-class values. Those who do not must find a way to reconcile the values of their subculture with those of the mainstream culture.

This paper is concerned with conflicts which arise for students in the university setting as a result of having ethnic backgrounds different from the middle-class norm. First, ethnic characteristics which may create problems in the university classroom will be considered. Second, the impact of ethnic differences upon psycho-social development will be discussed. Finally, some issues will be raised regarding the role of psychologists who work in university settings and deal with ethnic students.

Ethnic Characteristics Which May Affect Academic Performance

University professors have certain expectations as to what constitutes good academic performance and tend to reward behaviors that meet these expectations. Students are expected to show interest in

course material through such behaviors as attending classes, maintaining eye contact during lectures, and asking for additional information. They are rewarded for demonstrating mastery of academic subjects--not only by responding appropriately on exams and papers, but also by participating in class discussions, volunteering answers to questions, and asserting their own opinions.

Ethnic students, however, are often silent members of a class. For example, a basic value in American Indian cultures is that of individual privacy (Wax & Thomas 1967, p. 147 ff). In these particular cultures, it is considered rude to interfere with the actions of another person in any way, to inquire into his thoughts, or even to address him unless he indicates that he wishes to hear you. Since the Native American considers it impolite to ask questions and intrusive to be questioned, it is not surprising that Native American students tend to be silent and unresponsive in classrooms. Another behavior which seems to occur frequently among Native American students is the tendency to be particularly erratic in class attendance. This may be best understood as a response to what the American Indian experiences as the intrusiveness of the classroom situation, i.e., withdrawing from the situation is a polite way of saving the offender from further intrusiveness as well as of preserving one's own privacy. Unfortunately, however, these behaviors will not be rewarded in an educational system based on inquiry, assertiveness, and persuasion.

Similar value conflicts exist for the Spanish-American student (Elam 1967). In Spanish-speaking cultures the appropriate way to

show respect and courtesy to authority figures such as professors is to remain silent unless spoken to, avoid eye contact, look down or away when addressed, and accept what is said without question or objection. Students whose cultures have taught them to express their respect for authority in these ways must learn alternative classroom behaviors if they are to be rewarded in our academic system.

Spanish cultures and American Indian cultures both include a tradition of loyalty to the peer group (Wax 1967, p. 248 ff) and an emphasis on interpersonal cooperation rather than competition (Zintz 1967, p. 239, p. 241). Students who hold these subcultural values tend to view displays of knowledge in the classroom as one person gaining at the expense of others. Thus, since approval from the peer group is more important to them than approval from the instructor, such students will refrain from voluntary classroom discussion. Class participation is incompatible with their subcultural values.

A characteristic of Oriental cultures which is in conflict with the American system of education has to do with the use of negative reinforcement. In our classrooms, the emphasis is frequently placed on deficiencies in academic performance, and the expected reaction to criticism is that the individual will attempt to improve his performance. In Far Eastern cultures, on the other hand, criticism is used infrequently and is considered to have a destructive rather than constructive effect (Foa et. al., 1969). Oriental students whose ethnic background makes criticism a devastating experience for them are likely to be silent in class as a means of avoiding this experience. Furthermore, this low

tolerance for failure experiences makes it likely that such students will respond to criticism not with renewed efforts, but rather with a tendency to withdraw from the situation.

These examples suggest the variety of ways in which an ethnic student can find himself in a classroom situation where behaviors which had evoked positive reinforcement in his subculture are now negatively reinforced. Faced with discrepant reward systems, this student must choose between maintaining his ethnic pattern of response or adopting behaviors which are in conflict with his own personal values and experiences in order to meet the expectations of the mainstream culture.

Conflicts in Psycho-Social Development

Psychologists who work with university students in a campus counseling service or clinic setting deal extensively with the normal developmental problems of adolescence--i.e., the students seen in therapy tend to be concerned about issues relating to independence, identity, and interpersonal intimacy. Students on a commuter campus must confront these issues while making a daily transition between the university, where they are expected to assume adult roles, and the home, where they are typically expected to maintain a child-like role within the family constellation. For the ethnic student who is attending a commuter college this daily transition also involves an alternation between contending with the middle-class expectations of the university and meeting the expectations of his subculture.

Independence. Resolution of the independence issue is complicated for the ethnic student whose subculture does not value the idea of individuals functioning independently. For these students, adopting what the mainstream culture considers to be an adult role results in estrangement from his ethnic community. For example, the main culture considers it desirable for an individual to make his own decision regarding a marriage partner; in some ethnic groups, however, this act constitutes a rejection of the subculture (e.g., Mexican American--Burma 1967).

Identity. The university is a place where people are involved in a search for identity--vocational identity, sexual identity, religious identity, political identity, etc. For the ethnic student, this search usually entails, among other things, a need to try out both sides of his bi-cultural experience. Since there is considerable pressure on subcultures to assimilate the values of the mainstream culture and since this pressure usually carries the implication that the subculture is less valid than the mainstream culture, ethnic students often find it difficult to take pride in and identify with their cultural heritage. Some ethnic students opt to deny their heritage as much as possible, totally rejecting subcultural values. Others attempt to bolster self-concept by joining ethnic separatist groups, or sometimes even by returning to the country or place of ethnic origin. Relatively few ethnic students, particularly those who are the children of immigrants to this country, seem able to reach a satisfactory resolution of the role conflicts inherent in being a "marginal man" (Krech et al. 1962)--a product of two cultures, but fully accepted by neither.

A notable exception on our campus is the group of Lithuanian students (mostly second generation), who are generally quite adept at relating to the academic and social expectations of the university, yet are, as a group, determined to maintain their own language, social customs, and community life as well. It is important to note, however, that this particular ethnic group is one whose value system as a whole is minimally discrepant from that of the American middle-class culture.

Interpersonal intimacy. A common experience of the ethnic student on the urban university campus is one of social isolation at a time in his life when interaction with peers is developmentally important. A commuter campus is not conducive to social interaction among students in any case, particularly when most students hold jobs off campus and remain on campus only long enough to attend classes. For the ethnic student, social isolation is increased by the communication barriers resulting from different cultural values and expectations, ethnic group stereotypes, and cross-cultural language difficulties.

The Role of Psychologists Vis-à-Vis Ethnic Students

Clinical psychologists, as a group, tend to be individuals with middle-class values, who utilize skills and techniques best suited to middle-class clientele. Most of us rely upon traditional verbal insight-oriented therapy, an approach which seems to meet with the greatest degree of success when our clientele is bright, verbal, self-analytical, self-disclosing, and authority-oriented to the extent of seeking help from people whom society designates as experts in dealing with a certain type of problem.

College students are, in general, ideal therapy candidates, since they tend to have these characteristics. The ethnic students who find their way to campus counseling centers and clinics are usually responsive to our therapeutic techniques also, but this probably has to do with a process of self-selection--the ethnic students we see in therapy are for the most part already heavily invested in a middle-class life style.

Even with ethnic students who have the characteristics of good therapy candidates, there are cultural barriers which may reduce the effectiveness of the therapeutic relationship. Perhaps the most devastating of these are stereotypes held by either therapist or client which prevent them from relating to one another as individuals (Rich 1971; Vontress 1969). For example, a white therapist might be rejected by a black student simply because he is white--or vice versa. One of the first concerns voiced by ethnic students in therapy groups and sensitivity groups is the fact that they are ethnically different and that they feel it is impossible for anyone else to understand what it's like to be Chinese, Afro-American, etc. There is some truth to this: it is not possible for any human being to understand completely the experiences of any other human being. But <u>similarities</u> in human experience do provide sufficient basis for communication between individuals despite <u>differences</u> in life experiences. Unless these students can accept the idea that human similarities are as important as ethnic differences, they will be unable to benefit from a therapeutic situation which requires cross-cultural communication.

What about the ethnic student who isn't able to utilize our standard therapeutic techniques, or the ethnic student who doesn't see our skills as relevant to his problems? These students do not usually seek counseling on their own initiative, but they frequently present themselves to us, often somewhat reluctantly, as a result of referral from faculty or administrators who have become aware of the student's academic or personal difficulties. All too frequently in these cases, the student's inability to function in the counseling relationship as we structure it prevents the formation of a working relationship. The psychologist can be of help to these students only to the extent that he is able to alter his customary mode of functioning so as to meet the needs of individuals who cannot or do not wish to behave in middle-class ways.

Traditionally, psychologists have considered it unethical to advertise services or to actively seek clientele. We sit in our offices and wait for people to come to us with problems. There are, however, those who argue that attempts at "outreach" or "intervention" may be appropriate in a number of settings, including university counseling services (Branson & Monaco 1970; Pearl 1970; Tulkin 1972; Winter 1970). For example, it has been suggested that psychologists become actively involved in designing programs to increase faculty and administration awareness of the problems and needs of ethnic students. It has also been suggested that psychologists attempt to involve both ethnic and white middle-class students in programs designed to improve

cross-ethnic communication (e.g., workshops, sensitivity groups, therapy groups). Outreach programs aimed at ethnic students in university settings will probably succeed to the extent that they are able to meet the needs of these students without being intrusive and to the extent that they can enhance the functioning of these students without perpetuating the implication that help is needed because of deficiencies in the student's ethnic subculture.

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Footnote

1. Portions of this paper were presented at the 80th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, Honolulu, September, 1972.